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Flee

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Flee

Abstract

This is a film review of *Flee* (2021), directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen.

Keywords

Refugees, Afghanistan, LGBTQ identity, Taliban

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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Flee (2021), dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen

This unusual documentary is based on director Rasmussen's 25-year friendship with Amin Nawabi (a pseudonym), a fellow refugee in Denmark. Rasmussen is a Russian Jew, and Amin escaped from Afghanistan soon after the Taliban took over in 1989. Through the anonymity afforded by animation, Amin is able to tell his true story for the first time, and the result is powerful and affecting.

Rasmussen interviewed Amin about his past, and is able to integrate this material with archival film footage as well as animation that dramatically recreates both the interviews and episodes from Amin's life. What emerges is a story of survival, but also one of identity, guilt, and eventual acceptance. Amin first escaped with his mother and siblings to Russia, where they remained for years trying to gather the resources to hire illegal human traffickers to take them to Sweden. They are not legally present in Russia, and only survive through bribing or avoiding the corrupt police who terrorize citizens in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Amin

eventually makes it to Copenhagen, but is separated from his family who ends up in Stockholm. He is unable to visit them for some time, and has to stand by a phony story that his family is dead in order to authenticate his refugee status in Denmark. He feels survivor's guilt as well as loss as he reflects on the tremendous sacrifices his brother made to help him escape, and how much it cost him.

Amin also has guilt about being gay. In Afghanistan, there was no discussion or even words for homosexuality, and yet he knew he was attracted to men from a young age. As an adult in Denmark, he began a serious relationship with Kaspar, but he does not even tell him the truth about his family. Amin has trouble trusting anyone, and so pulls away from Kaspar. Only with telling his true story to Rasmussen does he become truly open to this relationship, and as his family has also accepted the fact that he is gay, Amin can finally accept his own identity.

This film is a unique refugee story for its combination of documentary storytelling with the style of animation, starkly juxtaposing the creations of the filmmaker with reality. All documentaries do this in different ways, but somehow the use of animation allows a certain freedom as well as power in conveying the emotional tensions of Amin's journey to his new life. The film was awarded the Sundance Film Festival World Cinema Grand Jury prize for best Documentary feature film.